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SUBJECT: DFM KARASIN ON GEORGIA AND OTHER NEIGHBORS

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reason: 1.4 (b, d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Two contentious issues -- Georgia and the Russian charges against the American HOM of OSCE Moldova -- dominated the Ambassador's September 4 meeting with DFM Karasin (the latter exchange reported separately). On Georgia, Karasin said State Minister Bakradze started off on the wrong foot with Russia by adopting tough tones of outrage. Karasin gave a lengthy exposition of the August 6 missile incident along familiar lines. He tied that incident, the August 22 air incursion over Kodori, and the detention of peacekeepers in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia together as an alleged Georgian preparation for military action. Karasin and the Ambassador briefly discussed Karasin's weekend visit to Baku, Ukrainian politics, GUAM and controversial remarks by the Russian ambassador in Belarus. END SUMMARY.

Azerbaijan

¶2. (C) Karasin led off with Baku, from which he had just returned. He found the Azeris in a "good mood," eager under their "multi-vectorized" foreign policy to develop relations with Russia. Use of the Qabala radar station figured in discussions, and Karasin said he noted to the Azeris the difference in principle between the U.S. and Russian approaches, with the U.S. viewing Qabala as a complement to its other plans, while Russia viewed it as an alternative.

¶3. (C) Karasin was not optimistic about progress on Nagorno-Karabakh peace talks; he found the Azeri mood "grimmer." The last possible venue for progress before the Armenian electoral cycle kicks in will be the October 5-6 CIS meeting in Dushanbe. The Azeris had complained to Karasin about OSCE special representative Andrzej Kasprzyk, who had angered them by accepting a diplomatic note from the Karabakh authorities. Karasin said he had agreed this was a mistake, but Kasprzyk had ten years' experience on the thorny issue; replacing him would mean a hiatus of at least a year before his successor knew enough to work effectively.

Ukraine

¶4. (C) Karasin said Russia is "calm" about the upcoming Ukrainian elections. Russia is not taking sides. There are some "permanent" irritants, such as the Ukrainian harping on the Holodomor (1930's collectivization famine) and compensation for relatives of victims of Stalin's repression -- legal cases Americans are helping Ukrainians prepare. Ambassador said the U.S. is also calm about the Ukrainian elections.

GUAM

¶ 15. (C) Karasin raised the GUAM proposal to discuss Frozen Conflicts at the UN. He believed no good could come out of such a discussion. He thought the U.S. and Russia should agree to the solution adopted last year, and defer discussion to the 62nd General Assembly. Ambassador said Washington was considering the issue at present.

Belarus

¶ 16. (C) The Ambassador thanked FM Lavrov for denying statements by Russian Ambassador to Belarus Surikov to the effect that Russia could consider deploying nuclear weapons in that country. Karasin said that Surikov was expressing personal thoughts. They had been taken out of context and blown up by the Belarusan media. "It is a minor diplomatic incident," he said. "Nothing more."

Georgia

¶ 17. (C) The Ambassador said he had just spoken with A/S Fried on the August 6 missile incident in Georgia. We are not trying to politicize the incident. It is in everyone's interest to move back to a process of normalization between Russia and Georgia. Ambassador asked about the August 30 visit of Georgian State Minister for Conflict Resolution Bakradze and DFM Manjgaladze.

¶ 18. (C) Karasin replied that it was good that the Georgians came, but he "personally didn't like" their tone of outrage. Karasin had met Bakradze several times before, and found him thoughtful and intelligent. But last week he was "emotional"

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and "stressed," and not very diplomatic. Karasin railed -- along familiar lines -- against the charges of aggression laid at Russia's door by the Georgians after the August 6 missile incident. He was "disappointed" that most western countries accepted the Georgian version. He reiterated the standard Russian analysis of the incident, concluding that it was a Georgian fabrication. He said that with former DefMin Okruashvili returning to politics in opposition to Saakashvili from the right, Saakashvili is being forced to move right to cover his flank; Karasin implied this was the motive behind the alleged fabrication. Ambassador replied that the U.S., despite its opposite view of the incident, is not seeking to politicize it. Rather, our aim is to prevent a recurrence of such incidents and to get the normalization of Russian-Georgian relations back on track. Karasin had related the incident to Georgia's political climate; the Ambassador noted that Russia, too, is gearing up for elections.

¶ 19. (C) Karasin said he believes Georgia is preparing for military action in South Ossetia. He based this conclusion on Georgia's defense budget, its military acquisitions, the missile incident, another air incident over Kodori at the end of August, the arrest of members of the North Ossetian peacekeeping contingent, and the detention of members of the CIS peacekeeping force in Abkhazia. He noted that these were forced to lie face-down on the ground. "Some of these peacekeepers come from various ethnic groups," Karasin said; "and they may decide to take matters into their own hands." Karasin continued that the Georgians refuse to sign agreements on the non-use of force, and are starting to assert that the South Ossetians are not a party to the conflict.

¶ 10. (C) All of these actions frighten the South Ossetians as well as the Abkhaz, Karasin asserted. Russia is working to calm the situation. It wants the scheduled Joint Coordinating Commission plenary on South Ossetia to go ahead in Tbilisi this month as scheduled. Karasin will receive a South Ossetian representative on September 5 or 6. Karasin

said the U.S. should know that Russia will not change its position on the Sanakoyev "alternative government" in South Ossetia, and will not meet with him or his organization. The Ambassador replied that Russia must use its influence in South Ossetia to tell Tskhinvali in the strongest terms that resort to military force is unacceptable. That is the message we are delivering in Tbilisi, and we will continue to do so. The escalation of tensions must stop and normalization of relations must be put back on track.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Russian emotion on Georgia has not abated. Rather, the embarrassing August 6 incident has only convinced people like Karasin -- who have to defend Russian actions and clean up after the armed forces and security services -- that anything but the hardest of lines will result in Russian loss of face and charges that they themselves are "soft on Georgia."

Burns